

(Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 NRSV)

1 ¹ The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw. ² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³ Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴ So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous-- therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

2 ¹ I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. ² Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³ For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. ⁴ Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

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For There Is Still a Vision

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
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Text: Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

Habakkuk cries out in frustration to God; he cries out nearly in accusation. Habakkuk wants to know how long the cries for help will go unheard, how long the injustices will persist, and how long the destruction and wreckage will continue.

To what injustices and destruction is Habakkuk referring? What is the historical situation of his lament?

Very often in the Bible books we can identify the historical setting and events. Some come right out and tell us: It is in the thirteenth year of king Josiah, Jeremiah tells us. Or we learn Quirinius is governor of Syria when Joseph and Mary head for Bethlehem. Other times we can figure it out from some more indirect information. The book of Nahum, we can tell, is written in Nineveh before its fall in 612 b.c.e. but after the fall of Thebes in 663, so we know it must have been written in the fifty one years between those two dates. But very often we are left guessing. The moving words of the prophet Joel, which we have come to love, Your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions, were written sometime in the five hundred year span between 800 and 300 b.c.e., we think. And scholars have dated our reading today, Habakkuk, as early as the eight century b.c.e. and as late as the fourth century, a four hundred year range.

So, we don't know exactly when the horror, frustration and devastation to which Habakkuk is referring actually happens. It could be any time. And that can give us something to think about. Here we have Habakkuk groaning under the load of horrible pain and suffering and cruelty at the hands of his enemies, crying out to God in bitter anguish, and the fact is, he could have written the words at almost any point in human history. For there are but few breaks in the moaning in God's good creation.

Here in our country just now we may be a bit insulated from the hurt of which Habakkuk speaks. It's been nearly thirty years since the last war that took many of our sons and daughters. And it has been almost a hundred and fifty years since soldiers were fighting on this soil. We have not experienced in living memory hostile forces ravaging our streets and homes, murdering and raping our civilian population, wrecking our homes, carrying us away, or massacring us in our fields

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and woodlands. For a very long time we have moved freely about our land without such worries.

But, of course, trouble of this kind still exists in parts of the world. We see the evidence in every newscast that Habakkuk's words of lament could be spoken today. On the television screen you see the image of the man from Kosovo. He looks to be perhaps fifty. His sons have already been shot. His community has been overrun by Milosevic's Serbian soldiers. The man is fleeing for his life; family, land, belongings, identity, hope all shattered. He walks down the dusty refugee road, away from the news video camera. But he looks back at it over his shoulder. His creased but barren face reveals that his emotions have long since gone by fear and even anger. There's little more to fear, and anger does no good. His look declares only bewilderment. And he poses the obvious question, How long shall I cry for help and you will not listen? Or cry to you Violence! and you will not help?

In the first sense he asks the questions of you and me. Looking, unblinking, into the lens of the American news camera, he wants to know, Why have we continued to let this happen?

His question is a good one. Milosevic has proven himself to be another in a long line of adepts who can taunt the international community just to the edge of war. He is smart. He knows the rules and the line not to cross. Like so many others before him he knows he can depend on no action if he but stops just short of the line and if he offers even the faintest hint of cooperation. But the man who has buried his sons and is fleeing his home does not care about the gamesmanship of the international stalemate. All that he has loved has crumbled about him.

And, perhaps, in the second sense, like Habakkuk, the man asks his questions of God. For after all, I suppose even he knows that the resistance civilized people have to war is well taken. For while some wars are necessary, none of them ends the saga of human travail. Sometimes one may do some lasting good, as when the horror of Hitler was finally squelched. More often, war but rearranges the players a little. Even the hot war of World War II was followed by the great cold war. And in some ways these struggles in Yugoslavia, Kosovo, and Albania, and before this, in Bosnia flow from the Soviet era. So I imagine the man looking in the camera lens must know that warplanes and missiles offer limited and even dangerous relief. So he joins the line of broken men and women that stretches back into prehistory, who bring their case to God and wait for God to answer.

As we gather on this World Communion Sunday, this day when we symbolize the solidarity of the human community by sharing bread and wine around the globe, I have to confess to a heavy heart that there are so many like this man in Kosovo. There are monks who are still held and tortured in prison in Tibet. There are Rwandans who know that Jean Paul Akeyesu's three life sentences won't bring back the half a million people for whose genocide he is responsible. There are

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mothers who still grieve their sons and husbands in a million villages in Latin America. So much and so intractable is our grief. To us, and to God, it is fair to pose the questions, How long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?

And what will the answers be?

In the human domain the answers are at best incomplete. There are no easy solutions, and many of our solutions do create new problems. It takes great care to keep from making matters worse rather than better. But I do have hope. It is a hope of the long haul, a hope requiring more patience than I sometimes feel I have.

Often we adults seem certain that the generation that follows us is taking the world to a bad place in a handbasket. Even Socrates felt certain that the youth were on their way to ruin. In the end, I suspect that this sentiment isn't so much about youth as it is about the changing of the guard. Perhaps, in an ironic way, it's easier to let go of the reins when we can at least gloat that those who follow us do the job poorly. It helps feed the nostalgia of the good old days. But I want to make bold to say that slowly, two steps ahead and one back, at a rate that is sometimes almost imperceptible, the world is moving forward not backward.

In Biblical times, lest we think of those times too highly, perhaps 5% of the people lived above poverty. The other 95% lived not only in poverty but in one kind of subjugation or another, as slaves or serfs. World class governments crucified their enemies and even common criminals by the edge of the road. More rulers died by assassination than old age.

And look even at the last half century in our own nation. There are many things about which we can be critical, to be sure. There are steps backwards as well as ahead. Sometimes they convince us we are going in reverse. The song in the sixties went, In the year 2525 if man is still alive, if woman can survive. The song said we were definitely headed the wrong way. But, in fact, look at the moral ground we have gained since even the middle of this century.

Subjugation of women and racial minorities may continue, but as Krister Stendahl, the scholar of Christian/Jewish relations, notes, bigotry will never again be noble. James Byrd died a horrible death in Jasper, Texas, but only the most marginal of characters applauded. Even thirty and forty years ago it would have been a different story.

When my father and mother were married, the presiding minister told them that a man could not beat his wife with a stick any thicker than his thumb. While family violence remains a serious and widespread problem, every state today seeks to protect spouses from domestic violence, and none condones what we have come to recognize as abuse.

Even as we grapple with the continuing horrors of our world, even as some things have gotten worse, let us recognize that contrary to how it sometimes seems,

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we are making progress. To me this is an important recognition, for it allows me to dream of a day I believe will come, though I know I will never see it, a day when there will be no refugees from war and atrocity, a day when the world community will live in peace, a day when it will look back on the words of Habakkuk or the film clips of the man fleeing from Kosovo and try to imagine why the times were so barbaric and what it must have been like. I believe there will be such a day. Maybe it will be the year 2525; I hope it may be before that. I dream of this day, and such a dream prompts me to keep on trying and to keep from being discouraged.

In the end, that seems to be God's answer as well. In Habakkuk God says, Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end [of trouble], and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come.

God wants us to make a sign with large letters and make it so plain that someone running by can read it. And note that God does not command that this big sign held up at sporting events say, John 3:16, or The End Is Near. Instead, God says make a huge sign that says that creation is on the mend, that says that justice will prevail, that the proud will falter, and that the tears of the tormented will be wiped dry.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come. For the man leaving Kosovo and for so many others these words offer no quick respite. But they do offer a point on which to focus our faith and our hope and our belief. And they offer, also, a point on which to focus our work in and vision for the world, as the solidarity of one with another slowly gains a foothold in the drama of human history.

Thanks be to God. Amen.